

# Of Plymouth Plantation' Part II: Holland and The Mayflower

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This is the second of three columns based on Governor William Bradford's remarkable account of the Pilgrims' physical and spiritual journey between 1607 and 1647, in "Of Plymouth Plantation." I have used the 1981 Modern Library edition, edited by Francis Murphy of Smith College.

In 1607, when the Separatist congregation of Scrooby, England, sought to move to Holland they were refused. In 17th century England (as in future totalitarian states) a license was required to go abroad. As in totalitarian states, these were commonly denied to religious dissenters. In England's case, especially to Catholics and Separatists.

State interference led to inflated charges for passage and frequent betrayal by predatory carriers. After being betrayed and imprisoned, some of the Scrooby congregation made it to Holland through a two-week North Sea storm in 1608. Others, including women with only the clothes on their backs, were left to fend for themselves on the coast of England. All lost their homes and possessions in Scrooby.

After 12 years, the congregation was ostensibly well established in Leyden, Holland. But members were unhappy that their children were losing their Englishness, and they undertook a far more dangerous passage than the one that had brought them to Holland. By and by, King James I agreed not to molest them if they made their way to Virginia, though for political reasons he would not say so openly.

As Bradford describes the Mayflower's late-season Atlantic passage, "Our voyage to America hath been as full of crosses as ourselves have been full of crookedness." When at last they found the lee of Cape Cod Bay, Bradford writes, "[T]hey had no friends to welcome them nor inns to entertain or refresh their weather beaten bodies." They also had no means of protecting themselves other than the solider of fortune and non-separatist, Captain Myles Standish.

On the 15th of November, 1620, they followed some Indians, hoping (one wonders how) to speak to them, into "such thickets as were ready to tear their clothes and armor to pieces." (Probably this was our native bull thorn.) Overnight they made themselves "barricade with logs and boughs as well as they could."

History records that the Indians of Cape Cod had had bad experience with marauding English and Viking ships, and in their first encounter with the Pilgrims they attacked them. First Encounter Beach in Eastham marks the spot. Later the Cape Indians' relations with these English became friendly.

Of the 102 Mayflower passengers who reached Cape Cod, four died before reaching Plymouth. Over the course of the winter of 1621, 48 more perished, including 14 heads of families – meaning men. Thus some 34 of the dead were women or children, who were nearly wiped out.

The late Dr. George Gardner of Duxbury investigated this discrepancy and believed he understood the reason. The Indians buried their dead with corn. Dr. Gardner believed that in the seemingly unending winter, starving wives retrieved this corn, which was contaminated with botulism, and thus killed them and their children disproportionately.

History also records that in the first year the Pilgrims met and were aided by two English-speaking Indians, Samoset and Squanto. Samoset, whose common name may or may not be a corruption of English “Somerset,” came from what today is Maine.

Squanto was a native of Patuxet, the Indian settlement above Town Brook in Plymouth, as well as around Duxbury Bay. The Patuxet were wiped out by smallpox about 1617, leaving their fields empty but cleared. Squanto had been kidnapped and taken in slavery to Spain and England. Through a will to be envied, he talked his way into a return passage to America. He found his way back to Patuxet, only to find that all he knew had perished.

In August of the first summer, word came to the Plantation that, envied as a friend of the English, Squanto had been kidnapped and possibly killed. Captain Standish was dispatched to what is now Gardner’s Neck in Swansea where he found that Squanto had been threatened but not killed. Captain Standish’s handling of this confrontation won the respect of what Bradford calls “divers sachems” from Pocasset (the Cape) and Nemasket (Middleboro).

This episode is significant because it puts Standish in a different light than the confrontation for which he is better known, called “The Wessagusset Affair.” We will deal with Wessagusset and its meaning in Part III.